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ABSTRACT

A study examined the different approaches that daily newspaper and weekly newspaper editors take toward letters to the editor. It was believed that (1) editors of weekly newspapers would regard as more important letters referring to the community positively, while (2) editors of daily newspapers would regard as more important letters dealing with controversial issues and conflict. Surveys were completed by 55 weekly and 45 daily newspaper editors in a large eastern state. Circulation figures for those papers ranged from fewer than 5,000 to more than 100,000, representing a variety of community sizes. The results supported the hypotheses. The proportion of weekly and daily editors regarding as important or unimportant letters reflecting conflict presented an almost perfect inverse relationship. These results lend support to the notion that newspapers are reflections of the social structures in which they operate. The tendency of daily newspapers--usually published in larger heterogeneous communities--to report more conflict, and the inclination of weekly newspapers--usually published in smaller homogeneous communities--to suppress it, illustrate the importance of the social environments in which these newspapers operate. These differences reflect the prevalence of the conflict model and the consensus tradition in structurally different communities. (HTH)

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Newspapers' Letters to the Editor

As Reflections of Social Structure

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Newspapers' Letters to the Editor
As Reflections of Social Structure

A long-standing concern among students of the press has been the definition of the roles and functions of the newspaper. There is general agreement on basic similarities and differences between weekly and daily newspapers with regard to their information-delivery functions, patterns of influence and the type of service they provide to the communities they serve.

This paper examines these similarities and differences with regard to letters-to-the-editor policies of daily and weekly newspapers, and proposes that these policies are a reflection of the newspaper's role in the community.

The focus is on letters to the editor because they provide the element of feedback essential to effective communication within every community. As such, letters to the editor become an important factor in the study of social control processes and in understanding the normative and integrative functions of the newspaper.

The importance of letters to the editor in American newspapers has been well documented in the literature. Letters are among the most popular features in the newspaper (Mohn and McCombs, 1980; Sandman, Rubin and Sachsman, 1982) and editors (Hynds and Martin, 1979) as well as readers (Singletary, 1976) consider letters to be important.

There are several generalizations that can be drawn from previous studies. Editors prefer short (250-300 words), signed letters dealing with relevant, local concerns. Similarly, there is agreement on the profile of the letter writer, who tends to be older, well-read, male, professional,

conservative and a long-time resident of the community (Vacin, 1965; Grey and Brown, 1970; Singletary and Cowling, 1979; Hynds, 1980).

Despite this common ground, because of contextual differences and variations in size and nature of their respective audiences, editors of dailies and weeklies are likely to perceive the role of the letters differently and may value different elements in the letters they receive. We contend that these variations are related to the differential role of weeklies and dailies in fostering a sense of community and consensus. Studies of the community and its media provide a theoretical foundation for understanding these differences.

Mass Media and Social Structure

Structural aspects of mass communication have been analyzed at various levels. At the community level, the focus has been on the functions of the media in different environments. Janowitz (1967) examined the role of the community media in an urban setting and concluded that the development of the mass media, and especially the community newspaper, has been related to the need to coordinate and maintain consensus within the urban community. In Janowitz's functional perspective, the mass media, in turn, have contributed to the growth of urban centers by providing the channels for mass information and symbolism required for the solidarity and integration of vast aggregates of the population.

Evidence from some community press studies supports the notion that these newspapers facilitate the integration of individual and groups into the community structure. The local community newspaper contributes to the integrative process in several ways. Janowitz (1967) found that suburban newspapers near Chicago served as a "ready sociological index to community organization and

community orientations," informing citizens continually about the existence of clubs and agencies and their activities. Edelstein and Larsen (1960) concluded that weekly newspapers stimulate discussion of local news and reinforce identification with local groups and the community as a whole. This stimulation and reinforcement pattern, they found, was a means of energizing local activities and elaborating social contacts through which a sense of community can emerge.

This theoretical interpretation can also be applied specifically to the letters column, which has long been seen as a way to build community. Vacin (1965) found that 61 percent of the letter-writers he surveyed cited "community motivation" as a reason to write. "Community problems" was the top category (38 percent) when Singletary and Cowling (1979) looked at the topics of writers to the non-daily press. Lemert and Larkin (1979) found that editors valued letters that discussed a public issue rather than letters that advocated what people could do about the issue. Daily newspaper editors told Hynds (1976) that their letters column was to provide a forum for idea exchange. This focus on local issues seems to be paying off. Mohn and McCombs (1980) found that "readers overwhelmingly chose editorial and opinion page content that addressed local affairs."

One way in which the media fulfill their integrative function is through reliance on local sources and community leaders. There is evidence that the media tend to emphasize the perspectives and positions consonant with the system's predominant value structure. In this sense, the media may consider representatives of established groups and prominent citizens to more likely express opinions and support proposals or actions that reflect general community orientations.

In a study of an Oregon daily newspaper, Lemert and Larkin (1979) found that the probability that individuals would have their letters to the editor published in the local newspapers increased with the extent of participation in community activities. Almost 50 percent of the individuals who had their letters published were active in four or more community activities. Similarly, Hynds (1980) reported letter writers most likely to be well-informed persons involved in community life. Vacin (1965) and Singletary and Cowling (1979) found letter writers more likely to be long-time residents of the community.

The Mass Media and the Reporting of Conflict

The literature reveals that the media may not only promote and favor groups and individuals, but also may protect the community from internal and external groups with disruptive intentions (Breed, 1958). Especially in smaller communities, the emergence of conflicting views that erode traditional values may be seen as disruptive and threatening to the community.

Several empirical studies provide support for this notion. Janowitz's (1967) study of three suburban communities near Chicago reported a tendency for local newspapers to avoid reporting controversies. A content analysis of these papers revealed little political coverage or editorializing. Although newspapers were not exactly neutral in their political orientations, most readers did not perceive the papers as politically oriented or following specific party lines. Instead the respondents saw the papers as instruments of "community welfare and progress." Similar findings were reported by Kearl (1951) in a study of Wisconsin weeklies. He found that even during election time, the community newspapers devoted less than 10 percent of the space to political content.

Edelstein and Shultz's (1963) case study of community leaders provides support for the notion that conflict may be regarded as disruptive. They found that most of the 40 leaders queried believed that newspapers should stick to the facts and not get involved in reporting controversies. This view was also supported in a study of 88 editors of community newspapers in Minnesota. Olien, Donohue and Tichenor (1968) found that the reporting of social conflict varied according to size and structural complexity of the communities housing these papers. They observed that higher levels of conflict reporting were more likely to occur in the larger, more structurally differentiated communities rather than in the smaller communities, where conflict was more likely to be suppressed.

Tichenor, Donohue and Olien (1980) propose that the mass media in general may contribute to the stability of the community through the control of information. Their finding that in smaller communities, newspapers are less likely to report conflict, while in larger and more structurally diversified communities there is a greater tendency to report conflict may confirm the belief that conflict control mechanisms vary according to the type of social structure.

The general proposition, then, is that in smaller communities conflict control is based on a personalized communication pattern and a consensus tradition, while in larger communities the mechanisms to control and regulate conflict may include a greater amount of feedback, a necessary condition to make adjustments in a diversified social system (Olien, Donohue and Tichenor, 1968).

The trend observed by Olien, Donohue and Tichenor is consistent with the findings of Janowitz (1967) and Vidich and Bensman (1963) suggesting

that small community media generally emphasize the positive aspects of community life by projecting an image of tranquility and relative consensus. Janowitz says that editorial matter, including letters to the editor, may be avoided because it appears to be controversial and this "runs counter to its normal position in the community." (p. 77)

In this study, then, we would expect that similarities exist between weekly and daily newspaper editors in the way they perceive the general role of letters (as a means of exchanging ideas) and in terms of style and format guidelines. But differences should exist in the approach editors take in the handling of letters that contain conflictive viewpoints or reflect on community activities and orientations.

Hypotheses under study.

Based on the preceding theoretical discussion, two principal hypotheses can be advanced for analysis.

H_1: Editors of weekly newspapers will be more likely than editors of daily newspapers to regard as relatively more important the content of letters that reflect the community positively.

In this hypothesis the underlying assumption is that the local weekly newspaper tends to provide more favorable coverage of the community. In this sense, letters to the editor should be regarded as an integral part of the total outlook of newspaper content, which tends to portray the local community in a more favorable light. This may be particularly true in the small, homogeneous community where the newspaper is generally regarded as a vehicle for promoting the community and its interests.

The second hypothesis is:

H_2: Editors of daily newspapers will be more likely than editors of weekly newspapers to regard as relatively more important the content of letters dealing with controversial issues and conflict.

This hypothesis is based upon considerations from community conflict theory. The observation that daily newspapers tend to cover a greater number of conflict stories, while weeklies operating in smaller communities tend to limit the reporting of controversies, should serve as the cornerstone for explaining this hypothesis. This follows directly from the principle that conflict is a stimulator of both information and attention to social issues, a role that is more readily ascribed to daily newspapers.

Method.

Data for this study were gathered through a survey of newspaper editors in Pennsylvania. Using a list of members provided by the Pennsylvania Newspaper Publishers' Association, questionnaires were mailed to 197 newspapers in the state. A total of 100 questionnaires were completed and returned, for a response rate of 50.7 percent.

Of the 100 responses used in this analysis, 55 correspond to weekly newspapers and 45 to daily newspapers. Circulation figures for these papers ranged from fewer than 5,000 to more than 100,000, which suggests that the sample represents communities of varying sizes.

Measures.

The measures used in this study were intended to tap several dimensions reflecting newspapers' orientations and specific policies regarding letters to the editor. These measures were divided into four main sections:
1) Practices and policies. This section consisted of close-end and open-end questions. Respondents were asked to provide information about the number of letters received and published on a typical week; average number of column inches devoted to letters; maximum length; policies regarding identification of writer, the withholding of names, and verification of authenticity; and

the type of editing letters receive.

2) Content of letters. This section was to determine whether the content of letters reflects concerns of the community; whether the content generates news or feature stories; and whether the letters generate editorial page content other than letters. All of these items were measured through structured questions in which respondents indicated if these instances occurred frequently, sometimes, seldom, or never in their respective papers.

3) Criteria for acceptance. This measure consisted of a battery of questions reflecting a series of characteristics editors considered as very important, somewhat important, of little importance or not important at all, in deciding whether to print a letter. These criteria included questions about grammar, conciseness, fairness, timeliness, prominence and place of residence of the writer, and whether the letter deals with controversial issues, represents conflict or consensus in the community, and reflects the community positively.

4) Opinion function. In this section, editors were asked to indicate the degree of importance (from very important to not important at all) attached to letters as a circulation builder, as a public service, as feedback from readers, as an index of public opinion, and as a public forum.

In addition, some background information about the respondents was gathered. This included title, years in this position at the newspaper and total years of newspaper experience.

Findings.

A descriptive analysis of the data indicates that in general this study supports the majority of the findings reported in previous studies. Of special interest here is the examination of the frequency distributions of the items relating to the genral practices and policies followed by newspapers in general.

A majority of the respondents (89.9 percent) indicated that their newspapers always require that all letters be signed. The data also suggest that editors would consider the withholding of names, they tend to verify the letters for authenticity, and they are likely to use Editor's Notes to respond to letters when they feel it is necessary (See Table I).

Additional patterns of uniformity are found in Table II, which indicates that when applying the criteria for accepting letters, editors tend to agree that letters should be concise and fair, and deal with a current issue. While the prominence of the writer seems to have no effect on whether the letter would be accepted, the fact that a letter comes from an area resident seems to increase its probability of acceptance. Similarly, there seems to be consensus among editors on the importance attached to letters as circulation builders, and their roles as public service, as feedback, as an index of public opinion, and as a public forum.

There are, however, some items in which no discernible pattern can be found, and those are the ones of central interest here. Criteria for acceptance that deal with reflections on the community and content of a conflictive nature seem to be more evenly distributed along the categories measuring the "importance" attached to these characteristics.

In order to test the hypotheses under study some data transformation was performed. The dependent variables were recoded to form dichotomies reflecting the dimensions of "importance" and "non-importance." The categories "very important" and "somewhat important" were collapsed to form a single category. Similarly, responses falling within the categories of "little importance" and "not at all important," were grouped into a category reflecting the opposite dimension. This allowed for the examination of 2-by-2 contingency tables and test for the statistical significance of the variations of the

proportions between cells.

The first hypothesis predicted that editors of weekly newspapers would be more likely to attach a greater degree of importance to those letters that contain statements reflecting the community favorably. Data presented on Tables III and IV are highly supportive of this hypothesis. Table III demonstrates clearly that there is a marked difference in the way editors of weekly and daily newspapers regard letters that reflect the community positively. Although the difference among weeklies is not as pronounced as would be expected, the larger difference among dailies makes this relationship highly significant ($X^2=5.2$, $p<.05$). This is evidence that weekly newspapers have a well-defined role in their environments, which includes the reporting of issues and events that enhance the local community. Further corroboration of this hypothesis is provided on Table IV which indicates that editors of weekly newspapers are also more likely to prefer letters that promote community activities ($X^2=4.54$, $p<.05$).

The evidence presented here should not lead to the conclusion that daily newspapers have no interest in the local communities they serve. A structural perspective of communication suggests that the differential role of weeklies and dailies is the result of the greater degree of structural homogeneity and heterogeneity that exist in different communities. The assumption, then, is that weeklies are likely to operate in communities that tend to present a monolithic front of ideals, values and local interests. When this is the case, one would expect the local daily to assume a leadership role, as Edelstein and Shultz (1960) have suggested. In turn, dailies serving larger communities address themselves to a more heterogeneous audience, where values and ideals toward the community tend to be diffused along a wider range of interests and concerns.

The second hypothesis predicted that editors of daily newspapers would be more likely to view favorably those letters that deal with controversial issues and conflictive viewpoints. Data in this study provide strong support for this hypothesis. Table V shows clear differences in the way editors of weeklies and dailies define the importance of content that address controversial issues (X^2=26.1, p.$<$.001). This strong relationship is enhanced by the findings on Table VI, which also illustrates this difference conclusively. In fact, the proportion of weekly and daily editors regarding the importance or non-importance of letters reflecting conflict presents almost a perfect inverse relationship (X^2=15.54, p.$<$.001).

The explanation for this relationship can also be found in structural analyses of communication. In fact, the findings reported here are consistent with structural theory, as it applies to the mechanisms to regulate conflict. Conflict is a condition of the system and as such it should not be viewed as a creation of newspapers. The mass media in general do not create conflict but they react to conflictive situations that have been defined and initiated by other sectors of the social system. It follows that daily newspapers operating generally in larger communities, and serving a variety of interest groups and a diversified audience, are likely to reflect a greater number of viewpoints and positions. The popular conception that big daily newspapers may show a predilection for conflict and sensationalism is not at issue here. The scope of a structural explanation for this phenomenon goes beyond that fact. The tendency of daily newspapers to report more conflict, and the inclination of weekly newspapers to suppress it, should be seen as a reflection of the social environments in which these newspapers operate. In particular, these differences should be seen as a result of the conflict model versus the consensus tradition that prevail in structurally different communities.

Conclusion

The data discussed here lend support to the notion that newspapers are reflections of the social structures in which they operate.

The question of what criteria newspaper editors use to select letters to the editor illustrates this point. The explanations provided here are not concerned with the individual motives that particular editors have in selecting letters, but with the structural forces that influence the selection of newspaper content in general.

The reflection hypothesis has been interpreted in many ways. Some theorists contend that the mass media reflect the social structure in terms of size, organizational complexity and degree of role differentiation (Breed, 1958). Others have suggested that the content of the mass media reflects the values, goals, ideologies and aspirations that prevail in society. Both interpretations share the underlying assumption that the mass media constantly interact with other subsystems in society, and it is through this interaction that the process that shapes media content begins to operate.

TABLE I

Newspapers' General Practices Regarding Letter of the Editor

	Always	Sometimes	Never	
Require that all letters be signed	89.8%	7.1%	3.1%	(N=99)
Withhold names on request	23.2	35.4	41.4	(N=99)
Verify for authenticity	55.5	43.4	1.1	(N=99)
Use Editor's Notes to respond to letters	2.1	77.8	14.1	(N=93)

TABLE II

Editors' Criteria For Acceptance of Letters

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Of Little Importance	Not at All Important	
Is gramatically correct	1.0%	19.6%	52.6%	26.8%	(N=97)
Concise	19.2	52.5	20.2	8.1	(N=99)
Fair	59.6	31.3	5.1	4.0	(N=99)
Current issue	30.3	42.4	18.2	9.1	(N=99)
Controversial issue	21.2	38.4	28.3	12.1	(N=99)
Prominent person	1.0	20.2	33.3	45.5	(N=99)
Area resident	57.6	29.3	10.1	3.0	(N=99)
Reflects community	13.2	22.4	37.8	28.6	(N=98)
Promotes community	19.2	26.2	35.3	28.3	(N=99)
Represents community consensus	20.2	12.1	38.4	29.3	(N=99)
Represents Conflict	17.2	31.3	26.3	25.2	(N=99)

Editors' Perception of Importance of Letters

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Of Little Importance	Not at all Important	
As a circulation builder	28.3%	37.4%	26.2%	8.1%	(N=99)
As a public service	75.7	19.2	2.0	3.1	(N=99)
As feedback from readers	71.7	23.2	4.1	1.0	(N=99)
As an index of public opinion	31.9	37.1	28.9	2.1	(N=97)
As a public forum	76.3	17.5	5.2	1.0	(N=97)

TABLE III

Letters Reflecting the Community Postively

Editors regard this characteristic as:	Weeklies (N=47)	Dailies (N=39)
Important	53.2%	23.1%
Not important	46.8	76.9
	100.0%	100.0%

($X^2 = 5.2$; $p < .05$)

TABLE IV

Letters Promoting Community Activities

Editors regard this characteristic as:	Weeklies (N=47)	Dailies (N=40)
Important	55.3%	32.5%
Not important	44.7	67.5
	100.0%	100.0%

($X^2 = 4.54$; $p < .05$)

TABLE V

Letter Deals with Controversial Issue

Editors regard this characteristic as:	Weeklies (N=47)	Dailies (N=40)
Important	36.2%	90.0%
Not important	63.8	10.0
	100.0%	100.0%

($X^2 = 26.1$; $p < .001$)

TABLE VI

Letter Represents Conflict in the Community

Editors regard this characteristic as:	Weeklies (N=47)	Dailies (N=40)
Important	27.7%	70.0%
Not important	72.3	30.0
	100.0%	100.0%

($X^2 = 15.54$; $p < .001$)

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